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# A LIBRARIAN'S GUIDE TO DC COMICS

**Joel Hahn**

The company now known as DC began as National Periodicals, publishing anthology series such as *Adventure Comics*, *More Fun Comics*, and *Detective Comics*. Superman, the first true “super-hero,” appeared on the scene in a brief story in *Action Comics* no. 1 (June, 1938). Batman appeared not long after, in the pages of *Detective Comics* no. 27 (May 1939)—and the world was never the same. In the late 1940s, National absorbed its competitor All-American Comics (which published such series as *Green Lantern*, *Aquaman*, and *Green Arrow*) and changed the company’s name to Detective Comics, “DC” for short. The merger made DC the largest comic book company until the 1950s, when interest in the medium dried up, and Dell, who at that time published Walt Disney’s comic books, took over the top spot.

## THE SILVER AGE OF COMICS

DC recaptured the limelight in 1956 with a revamped *Flash*, which started the “Silver Age” of comic books, a period of greatly increased popularity and general awareness of comic books. The popularity of the new *Flash* stories paved the way for a rise in popularity for DC’s few remaining super-hero series, the return—most often in a revised form—of many more of DC’s characters, and the rise of new competition in the form of Marvel Comics’ new super-hero series and

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increased popularity of existing competition from Dell Comics, Archie Comics, Charlton Comics, Gold Key Comics, and others. The upswing of popularity also brought an influx of creative talent, and the medium grew and matured greatly during this period, possibly more than at any other time in its history.<sup>1</sup>

At this time, DC generally concentrated on light, humorous stories featuring heroes who could never fail and characters without much depth—much more akin to the “Batman” TV show than the often pulp noir or dark adventure stories of the 1940s. Meanwhile, Marvel started increasing its market share at DC’s expense, with stories about heroes who were not “perfect.” As Marvel’s market share increased, DC became the no. 2 comics company in America and has generally held that position ever since.

Toward the end of the 1960s, DC editors decided to try a bold new strategy to restore the company’s standing in the industry. A first step was to promote artists such as Carmine Infantino, Dick Giordano, and Joe Kubert to editorial status. A direct result of these moves was the hiring of Neal Adams, an artist who had previously worked in advertising and on newspaper comic strips. Adams had a detail-oriented, dynamic style (sometimes dubbed “hyper-realism”) that would revolutionize comic book art. His heroes were more muscular, yet more anatomically natural. For example, in an issue of *Batman*, Adams was the first comic book artist to show a shirtless hero with chest hair. Adams’ work on a new hero called Deadman, in issues of *Strange Adventures*, took fandom by storm. Over the next few years, Adams put his inimitable stamp on such titles as *The Brave and the Bold*, *Batman*, *Detective Comics*, and *Green Lantern/Green Arrow*.<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, DC editors gave writer Denny O’Neil free rein to introduce more realistic stories with which readers could readily identify (as opposed to the wish-fulfillment fantasies of a Superman who could juggle planets and travel in time without breaking a sweat). Adams’ art, coupled with O’Neil’s gripping stories, created a synthesis that became the new standard the rest of the industry strived to emulate for more than a decade after their partnership at DC ended.<sup>3</sup>

Another significant change at DC was a move toward more topical, socially responsible stories, exploring themes of racism, poverty, and drug addiction. This trend reached its zenith during the brief run of Adams and O’Neil on *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (from 1970 to 1971), regarded by many to be some of the most significant stories in comic book history. Unfortunately, comic book readers seemed to prefer escapism over real-

ity. In the terse words of comic book critic and historian Robert Harvey, “Relevancy came and went.”<sup>4</sup>

Over the years, DC has bought out several other comic book publishers, including Fawcett and Charlton, absorbing their super-heroes into its own fold. DC was itself purchased by the company eventually known as Warner Communications (now part of the Time-Warner conglomerate) in 1968.

## CRISIS IN THE DC UNIVERSE

After nearly forty years of publishing super-hero comics, the DC “universe” had become exceedingly complicated, with new stories often contradicting established continuity. In order to explain certain characters’ existence since the late 1930s, as well as the fact that newly acquired characters from Fawcett and Charlton had never interacted with DC’s characters, the company created the “infinite Earths” theory; somewhere out there were alternate dimensions including one in which Superman started his career in the 1930s, another in which he started in the 1950s, another in which he was a villain, another which featured the Charlton characters, and so forth. In 1986, after many years of trying to deal with these problems in a patchwork manner, DC decided this situation was too complex and was a barrier to new readers, so they tried to rectify the situation. In a miniseries entitled *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, which crossed over into all of DC’s active series at the time, DC destroyed all of the alternate worlds but one, and moved all its heroes there. This also gave DC the opportunity to revamp characters such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman and attempt to make them more accessible to modern readers.

## DC TODAY

In the early 1990s, DC’s main line of comics had a reputation for being merely average or even mediocre—with few great lows, and fewer great heights. Now, Marvel’s financial troubles have pushed some readers away from that company’s titles, drawing their attention back to DC. Many discerning readers are finding that DC’s average story quality has increased several-fold in recent years. Nevertheless, only one or two DC titles repeatedly rank in the top ten, as ranked by monthly sales. However, the relative stability of so many series, and the instability of Marvel, has resulted in DC gaining ground on the position of no. 1 American comics publisher.

DC relies heavily on super-heroes for its income; Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman have all been cash cows for many years. No single series focusing solely on any of those three characters currently ranks among the top ten titles by sales, but they do all rank in the top 100. However, if one were to add all of the Superman or Batman spin-off series together, either would then easily rank near the top of the list of top series by sales. Licensing fees for movies, TV shows, lunch boxes, stickers, and the like also bring in a tidy sum.

DC has discovered a high demand for collections of stories from years past. Most of DC's leading titles have several trade paperback collections in print, and DC often republishes its mini-series in this format. Even many of DC's titles from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s have had collected editions published (usually in hardcover), so that fans can read the stories that made DC's characters famous in the first place. Demand is such, especially for collections of recent issues of series such as *Superman*, *Batman*, and Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, to name three, that DC attempts to keep as much of this backlist as possible perpetually in print.

The relative safety of being part of Time-Warner has allowed DC to branch out of the super-hero niche in recent years. The company now supports several specialty imprints: Vertigo, for fantastic horror, horrific fantasy, and other generally moody stories; Helix, for science fiction; Paradox, for certain "strange" specialty projects; WB, for series featuring characters licensed from Warner Brothers; and Cartoon Network, for titles featuring characters licensed from the Cartoon Network cable station. The backing of Time-Warner does not mean that DC's series are immune from changes or cancellation when sales do not maintain a high enough level. The current state of the marketplace is such that some of the series described below may have changed imprints or creative teams, or may even have been canceled by the time this article sees print.

### VERTIGO

In 1992, DC gathered together a number of series under group editor Karen Berger<sup>5</sup> that were all dark, suspenseful, and included weird super- or supranatural elements. They created a new imprint, Vertigo, for these titles; the name in part indicative of the desire to keep the audience off-balance with those elements, as well as with the very idea of comic books from a major comic publisher possibly showing sophistication and literary merit. The original group of series included *Doom Patrol*, Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman*, Grant

Morrison's *Animal Man*, and a series featuring a character originally seen in the 1940s, *Sandman Mystery Theater*. Vertigo's weird protagonists and weirder antagonists made for a noticeable "dark counterpart" to DC's tendency towards bright, super-hero oriented series in which the heroes are easy to identify and good usually triumphs over evil in the end.

Another hallmark of Vertigo titles is the tendency towards justly deserving the "mature readers" labels sported by most of the series under this imprint. These series often feature adult themes and situations that are not avoided or glossed over the way they are in many other series. Rather, they confront and challenge the reader to think about the situation and its ramifications. In addition, the language and violence are usually very strong; between these factors and the general themes, if the average Vertigo comic book were a movie, it would get an "R" rating.

### HELIX

Helix, a recent addition to the world of comics, is DC's science fiction imprint. The series that heralded the beginning of the imprint were chiefly bleak dystopian views of the future, quickly gaining the reputation of being exactly like Vertigo, except that it was dark, moody science fiction instead of Vertigo's dark, moody fantasy/horror. Within a year or so, all of those series had been canceled. Currently, there are only two series being published, the miniseries *Michael Moorcock's Multiverse* and the ongoing series *Transmetropolitan*.

*Multiverse* is an extension of Moorcock's own science fiction & fantasy novels; like his Elric of Melni-bone novels, this is part of his "Eternal Champion" cycle. It is an anthology of sorts rather than a straight series, with parts of three stories in each issue (including one featuring Elric), each with a different artist. *Transmetropolitan* portrays life in a near-future megapolopolis through the eyes of a cynical journalist. If these series do well through their first year, more series typical of "normal" science fiction fare will almost certainly follow. However, if the experiment fails, and sales are not sufficient to support the line, Helix will probably be folded into Vertigo.

### PARADOX PRESS

Originally called Piranha Press, Paradox targets the bookstore market with original trade paperbacks. Paradox has come out with several books of crime genre

graphic novels, including *Green Candles* and *A History of Violence*, but the primary feature of this imprint has become the “Factoid Books,” an ongoing series of off-beat collections of vignettes on a given theme, by artists with often wildly varying styles—sort of a “Ripley’s Believe It or Not,” but organized thematically. Examples of titles in this series include *The Big Book of Freaks* and *The Big Book of the Unexplained*. So far, the series has covered topics such as urban legends, conspiracy theories, criminals, hoaxes, UFOs and other paranormal events, death, and martyrs, among others. Between the various book themes, individual stories and the different artists, there is something available for everyone.

### THE SUPERMAN FAMILY OF TITLES (DC)

When Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman first appeared in 1938, he heralded the start of a new era in comic books—super-heroes had arrived on the scene. Superman is undoubtedly the best-known comic book super-hero, recognized by people—even some who have never seen a comic book—around the world. In addition to appearing non-stop in comics for sixty years, Superman has appeared in movie serials, movies, radio shows, cartoons, novels, and live action TV shows such as “The Adventures of Lois & Clark.” Most people instantly recognize his S-shield and the famous line “It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s Superman!” and know all about his other identity as Clark Kent, his weakness to kryptonite, his feelings for Lois Lane, and his arch-enemy Lex Luthor.

In 1986, Superman underwent a major facelift; the series was restarted from scratch by writer/artist John Byrne. Clark Kent was made to be the “real” personality, with Superman the alter ego; in addition, Superman’s powers were reduced to a level more on a par with the rest of DC’s heroes. In this way, the focus of the series was shifted from SUPERman to SuperMAN—instead of being an alien masquerading as a human, Superman is now a regular man with many of the problems facing most normal people, except that he also has super-powers. Superman stories are generally “all ages” fare<sup>6</sup> that concentrate on the often successful efforts of one man with great powers to make the world (or at least his corner of it) a better place.

In 1992, Superman was killed by the monster Doomsday. The event was accompanied by what may have been the most heavily hyped media coverage of a comic series. This was only the beginning, however, as it was the stories that immediately followed, leading up

to his triumphant return and recent wedding to Lois Lane, that held onto many of the people who had started reading the series with the “death” issue. In the last year, Superman underwent another change; his powers mysteriously changed to be electrical in nature, and he was soon accidentally split into two “supermen,” one red, one blue. Like the death and return of Superman, this change attracted many new readers, but also lost the series some long-time fans. The latter was due to a perception by some that the power-change was done merely as a temporary event to boost sales (and which had to end within a year or so in order for trademarks licensed world-wide to retain their marketability). Sure enough, Superman’s original powers were returned to him a short time ago, and he once again donned the most-recognized costume in comic books and kept up his ongoing struggle for truth and justice.

Superman’s exploits are found in five series: *Superman* (2nd Series, 1987-); *Adventures of Superman* (formerly *Superman*, 1st Series, 1939-); *Action Comics* (1938-); *Superman: the Man of Steel* (1991-); and *Superman: the Man of Tomorrow* (1995-). These five series are timed so that one book ships per week, every week of the year. The latter title is quarterly, shipping in months containing five weeks. Each series has its own art team and general “feel” to it, and the writers often try to have each series concentrate on an aspect of Superman’s life and certain members of his supporting cast. Nevertheless, stories routinely start in one title and are continued in the rest in such a way that it can be difficult to understand what is going on without reading the other four.

The last few years have also seen the addition of two spin-off titles to the Superman fold: *Superboy* (3rd series, 1994-) and *Supergirl* (3rd series, 1996-); both feature new starring characters, different from their Silver Age counterparts. The latter of these is currently written by Peter David, probably better known for his *Star Trek* novels and his many years of work on Marvel’s *Incredible Hulk* comic book. *Supergirl* is distinctly darker than the other Superman titles. The original Supergirl, who was Superman’s cousin, was killed during DC’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths* reboot and replaced with a benevolent alien shapeshifter. The new Supergirl is as much a heroine as her predecessor, but in this series she is often pitted against demonic forces and merciless enemies. She also struggles to win the acceptance of her foster parents, who are horrified to learn that the alien being who is Supergirl has involuntarily absorbed the memories and physical form of their dead daughter, Linda Danvers. A third spin-off, entitled *Steel* (1994-1998), was recently canceled.

## THE BATMAN FAMILY OF COMICS (DC)

Batman (more properly, *The Batman*), debuted in the late 1930s, shortly after Superman. The success of the 1960s TV show and the recent blockbuster movies ensures that most of the world is familiar with the story of Bruce Wayne, who as a child watched the murder of his parents and grew up to hone his body and mind to the epitome of human perfection, becoming the world's greatest detective. In so doing, Batman strives simultaneously to atone for not being able to prevent his parents' deaths and to prevent others from suffering the way he did.

Over the years, the tone of the book has ranged from pulp detective fiction in the 1940s to light-hearted and campy fiction in the 1960s to dark and moody fiction in the 1980s. It was in this last time period that Frank Miller created *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, a mini-series (conveniently set in the future to avoid any direct adverse impact on the current series) that served to redefine the character to be a person, permanently scarred emotionally by the murder of his parents, who must consciously fight his obsession to spend all night tracking down and confronting the criminal element of the city. It is this take on the character, along with Alan Moore's *Watchmen* mini-series, that was directly responsible for spawning the "grim and gritty" trend that dominated the comics market in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Partially due to the success of *The Dark Knight Returns*, this trend quickly spilled over into the various ongoing Batman series and persists to some extent to the current day. Batman is feared and/or respected by his peers and Gotham City's criminals alike, and rightly so. Batman stories are often emotionally intense and as such are not quite as appropriate as Superman (for example) for all ages of readers. However, DC tries to keep the tone at a level that would be readable and enjoyable by most pre-teens while not losing much of the "mature" themes and execution.<sup>7</sup>

Along with Superman, Batman is one of DC's flagship characters, and this is possibly best shown by the proliferation of series featuring the character as well as spin-off series. *Batman* (1940-), *Detective Comics* (1937-), and *Batman: Shadow of the Bat* (1992-) all feature the ongoing adventures of Batman, and *Legends of the Dark Knight* (1989-) tells tales set in the past. *Batman Chronicles* (1995-) is a quarterly title published in months which have a fifth week.

In the realm of spin-offs are *Nightwing* (1996-), featuring Dick Grayson, who was Robin up until the 1970s; *Robin* (1993-), featuring the current holder of

that name; *Azrael* (1995-), featuring the further adventures of the ultra-violent vigilante that temporarily filled in as "Batman" during the popular "KnightsEnd" storyline when Bruce Wayne was recuperating from a broken back; and *Catwoman* (1993-), featuring the exploits of the villainess partially popularized by her portrayal by Michelle Pfeiffer in the movie "Batman Returns."

## JLA (DC, 1997-)

Superman. Batman. Wonder Woman. Flash. Green Lantern. Martian Manhunter. Aquaman. Green Arrow. The Justice League of America, featuring almost all of DC's most popular (and most powerful) characters, is virtually guaranteed to attract a strong fan following, which is exactly what happened when a comic book of the same name exploded on the scene in 1960. However, DC did not adhere to this successful formula over the years. For most of the 1980s and early 1990s, *The Justice League of America* featured second-stringers—a group of characters who were popular, but usually not enough so to support their own titles. DC canceled the book in 1996, then giving the team a complete makeover for its 1997 relaunch as *JLA*. Under the guidance of writer Grant Morrison, *JLA* once again depicts the adventures of DC's mightiest heroes. The draw of DC's most famous characters, along with the superior writing by Morrison, have propelled *JLA* to the top spot as DC's best-selling title.

The core characters in this series make up most of the "old guard" of DC's characters, though a few of them are newer characters who have taken over a hero's name and responsibilities when the previous holder of the name passed on. The team also recently added several newer members from among the "second rank" of DC's heroes, so that there are now some newer faces in addition to the more familiar ones. The veterans on the team have known each other for years and often are able to pull the team together into a force as formidable in its way as the Chicago Bulls have been on the basketball court. With so many of DC's "heavy hitters" in one place, the team easily outclasses most of the possible threats in the DC Universe. Because of this, and to allow for the individual obligations of most of the members to the action of their own individual series, the team is usually only assembled when the world is faced with an insurmountable danger. The independent nature of each story arc, together with high recognition factor of most of the featured characters, make it easy for any reader to pick up a couple issues of the series

and quickly figure out what is going on. Most important, writer Grant Morrison and his successor on the title, Mark Waid, have captured the essence of the super-team book, with riveting action, galaxy-threatening menace, and superb interplay among team members. For many fans, both old and new, *JLA* represents the best of what super-hero comics should be.

### THE LEGION OF SUPER-HEROES FAMILY OF TITLES

The future of 30th Century Earth is kept safe by the Legion of Super-heroes. This series focuses on a group of super-powered teenagers who symbolize the efforts of the various races involved in the United Federation of Planets to work together in harmony. There are two linked series that portray the adventures of a very large organization of heroes: *Legion of Super-Heroes* (3rd Series, 1989-) and *Legionnaires* (1992-).

Cosmic Boy, who can manipulate magnetic fields; Saturn Girl, who is telekinetic; and Livewire, who can manipulate electricity into lightning bolts, are the core of the team, though there are easily a dozen other characters who could be considered major characters as well. Most of the characters are from wildly different worlds, and several of their peoples are generally hostile towards each other. The Legion is a way to show the next generation—the young people of the Federation—that hate is not the only way: cooperation can work too. As such, this series shows readers that prejudice is wrong and that it is possible for people of different backgrounds and races to work together as a group stronger and more versatile than a homogenous group would be.

The main characters are all teenagers, roughly the same age as much of the target audience or the age that fans were when they started reading the series—or, more likely, the age many readers wish they were. This creates a lot of reader-identification with the characters and is a perennial drawing-point of stories featuring these characters. In fact, Jim Shooter, who went on to become the editor-in-chief of Marvel during the 1980s, got his start writing stories for *Legion of Super-Heroes* when he was only thirteen! The large ensemble cast and the diversity of the characters' personalities also provide a greater chance that any reader will find characters to identify with and root for. The current fan base is not as large as for some other DC series, but Legion fans are very vocal and enthusiastic. When DC recently offered "Legion rings" for sale, demand was quite high.

### POWER OF SHAZAM! (DC, 1995-)

For a character that started out under the cloud of a lawsuit over similarity to Superman<sup>8</sup> and who had his name trademarked by rival publisher Marvel Comics, Captain Marvel has done well for himself in his current series.

This is the story of Billy Batson, an orphan sent to live with an uncle who just happens to be an evil mastermind. He wanders off the beaten path one day and finds himself in a cavern where he meets an old wizard in a white robe. The wizard gives Billy the power to gain the body of an adult, along with the powers of seven classical gods or legendary mortals. Billy becomes Captain Marvel, "the world's mightiest mortal," merely by calling out the wizard's name—Shazam. The name is also an acronym, referring to the origin of his powers: the wisdom of Solomon, strength of Hercules, stamina of Atlas, might of Zeus, invulnerability of Achilles, and speed of Mercury. Later on, the orphan Billy learns about his sister Mary, to whom the wizard has also given access to the same magical abilities.

Captain Marvel first appeared in *Whiz Comics* no. 1 (February 1940), a title launched by Fawcett Publications. His adventures continued in *Whiz Comics* until 1953, as well as in *Captain Marvel Adventures*, which premiered in 1941. In his heyday, Captain Marvel was the most popular super-hero in America, and his comics easily outsold such competitors as *Superman*. Much of the hero's attraction can be attributed to Billy Batson—any kid who ever read a Captain Marvel story dreamed of saying the magic word and becoming a super-hero. Another source of the character's popularity was the simple, fun-loving, cartoonish nature of the stories and art.<sup>9</sup>

DC felt threatened by Captain Marvel's success and believed that the character was deceptively similar to their valuable Superman trademark. The company sued Fawcett for copyright infringement, in a case that dragged through the courts for over ten years. Ultimately, DC won, forcing Fawcett to stop publishing the character in 1954. Ironically, DC acquired the rights to all Fawcett's characters in 1973 and promptly launched a Captain Marvel book of its own, entitled *Shazam* (1973-1978), followed by a live-action Saturday morning television show which ran for three seasons. Unfortunately, DC was unable to recapture the whimsical innocence of the original character, and the series never quite succeeded.<sup>10</sup>

Jerry Ordway, who worked for a time on the Superman series, relaunched the character in a beautifully rendered graphic novel in 1994. The following year, Ordway became the writer and cover artist for *The Power of Shazam!* ongoing series. This title is unique among DC's stable in that every cover is fully painted. The writing and interior art are also intended to invoke a nostalgia for the stories of the 1940s. Stories often feature elements such as mind-controlling worms, strange magicians, and reborn Nazi super-soldiers. The series is set in Fawcett city (named for the original publisher of Captain Marvel's adventures), where until recently, progress has been partially halted in a rough analog of the late 1940s; the cars, architecture, and clothing styles are all reminiscent of that earlier time.

Although Ordway's stories are not as whimsical as the originals, he has striven to maintain the innocence of Billy and Mary Batson. His is a tale about two children who are given the power—and wisdom—to help make the world a better place. Their innate naivete helps them to keep their hearts in the right place and their minds on task. But Billy and Mary also have to deal with the trials of growing up, such as school bullies, (foster) parents that just don't understand the Marvels' responsibilities, trying to stay in school but also be "on call" as two of the world's foremost heroes, and attempting to fit in—as pre-teens in adult bodies—with their adult super-hero peers. Ordway has also revived many of the Marvel Family's original cast of characters, including arch-villain Dr. Sivana. For the most part, *The Power of Shazam!* is suitable for younger readers, but is definitely appealing for older ones as well.

#### **FLASH (DC, 2ND SERIES, 1987-)**

The "fastest man alive" sprints through the pages of this series, often joined by a cadre of other "speedster" heroes, including Jay Garrick, the original Flash; the pre-teen Impulse (who has his own self-titled series, aimed at a slightly younger audience); Impulse's mentor Max Mercury, and Jesse Quick, whose speed often comes in handy in doing all the things needed to keep up with running her company.

Jay Garrick, the original Flash, was a hero in the 1940s. The series was canceled in the early 1950s when interest in super-hero comics dropped significantly. The series was restarted a few years later, with a new title character: a scientist named Barry Allen who was doused with a bath of chemicals when a lightning bolt struck his lab. This paved the way for other super-

heroes to appear and reappear throughout the market,<sup>11</sup> including those later created by Marvel Comics. When DC revamped and codified its "universe" in 1986 with the *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, one of the casualties was Barry Allen—but the Flash lived on as his nephew Wally West, who to that point had been known as "Kid Flash."

When you have a hero who can run at Mach 5 without breathing hard, adventures that would take a normal character several issues to get through are over in a few pages. To counter-act this, the writers have to spend more time on characterization and less on mindless action, and this has been one of the hallmarks of the series. His speed also allows the Flash to deal with normal criminals with relative ease; only the non-normal criminals can hope for any measure of success when the Flash is around. Over the years, several villains have had major recurring roles both individually and together in various combinations. As a whole, these villains—including Captain Cold, the Mirror Master, and Captain Boomerang—form the Rogue's Gallery, one of the most infamous villain groups to plague DC's heroes. None of these villains is particularly powerful, but the Rogues have become popular enough that fans cheered when they were recently brought back from a particularly ignominious "death."

The series was made popular in recent years by the work of Mark Waid, a writer revered by fans for his in-depth knowledge of the DC Universe, his appreciation for the super-hero tradition, his humor, and his emphasis on character development. This popularity led to the *Impulse* spin-off (1995-), as well as the "Flash" TV show starring John Wesley Shipp, which ran for a couple of seasons and is currently enjoying regular reruns on cable on The Sci-Fi Channel. Lately, *The Flash* has a slightly darker edge to it, now that writing chores have been taken over by Grant Morrison, another fan favorite.

#### **AQUAMAN (DC, 3RD SERIES, 1994-)**

The Lord of Atlantis swims on in this series, written by Peter David. There has always been a problem getting readers to empathize with a character who spends most of his life underwater talking with fish, but David has so far been fairly successful. In the 1960s, Marvel started a trend of introducing heroic characters with personality flaws, and this trend lives on in David's incarnation of Aquaman, which is an offshoot of the "grim and gritty" style of characterization. Aquaman must deal with a scheming ex-wife, a megalomaniacal

brother, the loss of a hand to a school of piranha, and still try to keep the people he rules happy and safe. For the most part he succeeds, but like anyone, he also fails and must deal with the results of that failure.

#### **GREEN LANTERN (DC, 3RD SERIES, 1990-)**

The original Green Lantern was Alan Scott, a railway engineer who was the sole survivor of a train wreck, due to the mystical energies of a weird green lamp. He discovered that the energies gave him the power to fly, to pass through walls, and be invulnerable to metal—so bullets bounced off him, but a wooden club would still do its job. When the bottom fell out of the super-hero market in the 1950s, the series was canceled.

The second Green Lantern, first seen in 1959, was Hal Jordan, a test pilot who found himself mysteriously transported to the site of a UFO crash. In the wreckage was a dying alien who bequeathed to him a power ring and costume, making Hal the designated protector of the sector of space which includes Earth as a member of the Green Lantern Corps. Hal Jordan was one of DC's heavy hitters until relatively recently. After Superman's death and return, a pair of villains got together and destroyed Hal's home town, along with everyone in it—including everyone close to him. This drove him insane; he changed his name to Parallax and became a villain of sorts himself. He murdered the rest of the Green Lantern Corps in order to gain their power rings and get enough power to recreate his home town, turn back time and prevent the town's destruction, or even create an entire alternate timeline in which his town survived. Hal died a hero, however, when he gave his life to save the entire world from an entity that was devouring the sun.

The current Green Lantern, Kyle Rayner, was a starving commercial artist when the sole survivor of the alien race that originally created the Green Lantern Corps bestowed upon him the title (and ring) of the only Green Lantern of the universe shortly after Hal Jordan went insane. Fans of Hal Jordan were angered and dismayed to witness what writer Ron Marz did with the character and were not very happy to see his "replacement." The series has been fighting that stigma ever since. In fact, Kyle is often derogatorily referred to as "Crab-Faced Guy," due to the design of his mask, by fans who can not bring themselves to call him "Green Lantern." However, the series has been quietly building up steam in the past few years; Kyle has gone from a third-string replacement to a character who gets grudging respect (and occasional rave reviews) from readers,

and is now coming into his own as a character right behind Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman.

#### **WONDER WOMAN (DC, 2ND SERIES, 1987-)**

Created by William Marston in the 1940s as an exploration of Marston's views of the female psyche,<sup>12</sup> *Wonder Woman* is something of an anomaly in the comics world—a long-running series featuring a strong and popular female character in a world of steroid-filled men and unbelievably-endowed women. While not as popular as Superman or Batman, *Wonder Woman* still manages to regularly hold her own among the top fifty comic books.

The story features Diana, a modern-day descendant of sorts of the Amazons of Greek myth. She is sent from the Amazons' home on Paradise Island to the outside world to battle the powers of evil with her super strength, agility and speed, as well as a magic lasso that compels anyone tied up with it to tell the truth. The series is rife with references to classical mythology, including frequent appearances by the Greek gods and goddesses. Fan-favorite John Byrne recently took over the writing and art chores on the series, and like Superman in recent times, Wonder Woman has undergone some rather drastic changes—including dying, becoming the new goddess of Truth, and being replaced as "Wonder Woman" by her Amazonian adoptive mother. Even so, the series is still primarily about Diana herself, and fans are awaiting the next major event in her life—or death, as it were—and wondering if this might include somehow forsaking her divinity and once again becoming human and resuming the mantle of Wonder Woman. The series has a strong focus on the female characters, especially Diana herself, as well as the trials and prejudices they face in the modern world.

#### **RESURRECTION MAN (DC, 1997-)**

What if there were a man who could never be permanently killed; one who rises up with a different super power each time he dies? This is the main premise behind this new title from DC. The series follows amnesiac Mitch Shelley, the "Resurrection Man," as he attempts to piece together the mystery of what his life used to be like as well as discover how an otherwise normal man gained the ability to rise from the dead. Thus far, storylines have focused on Mitch's discovery that he was a crooked lawyer killed in an explosion set by his wife and his law partner so that they could be

together and to permanently keep Mitch quiet when he decided to go straight. There is much more to his past for him to discover, but his quest is hampered by the fact that some of that past does not want to be discovered and has no qualms about sending ruthless killers and bounty hunters after him. Mitch Shelley is a man on the run, trying to keep from being captured and/or killed, and simultaneously trying to solve the mystery of his past and track down the people who made him what he is and who have hired several killers to go after him. He also frequently finds himself waking up in a pool of his own blood, realizing he must once again figure out what strange new powers have replaced those he had previously and also figure out how the new ones work.

### HITMAN (DC, 1996-)

Tommy Monaghan is a killer-for-hire. He's one of the best, and also possibly the only one in the DC universe that exclusively guns for super-powered targets, preferably super-criminals or heroes that have gone over to the wrong side of the law. There are plenty of viable targets in his normal stomping-grounds of Gotham City, as Batman can't catch all of the crooks, and even those Batman catches merely get locked up, only to escape and wreak havoc time and again. His job is made easier by the fact that he has powers of his own: he is a low-level telepath who can read the thoughts of anyone nearby, and he possesses X-ray vision. *Hitman* features a cast of equally quirky supporting characters, including Tommy's best friend and sidekick, Natt the Hat.

As one might guess, *Hitman* is aimed more at adults than at children, though, like most of their main series, DC still tries to keep it as "all ages" as possible. The title is not as dark and gritty as one might think; while *Hitman* has a definite edge to it, creators Garth Ennis and John McCrea also employ a great deal of gallows humor and outrageous situations to lighten the impact. This is best shown by Tommy's recent appearance in the pages of *Resurrection Man*. Due to some misinformation from his clients, the world's best executioner went after Mitch Shelley, a man who always comes back from the dead with a new super power. Once the duplicity was discovered, Tommy decided the best course of action was to repeatedly kill Mitch until he came back with a power that was good enough to enable Mitch to go after the people that hired Tommy. Humor that many would consider tasteless, coupled with a high body count, makes this is a series that is

definitely not for the squeamish. However, those who like to see the bad guys "get it" in the end, who enjoy crisp dialogue and great one-liners, and who appreciate offbeat stories, will find this series quite enjoyable. In this way, *Hitman* is similar to the best aspects of a Quentin Tarantino movie.

This series began at a time when more series were being canceled than begun, so many comics readers initially skipped it. It became something of a sleeper hit for DC and has quickly amassed a very loyal core of readers, ensuring its continuation for the foreseeable future.

### YOUNG HEROES IN LOVE (DC, 1997-)

On the lighter side of DC is *Young Heroes in Love*, a series about a team of super-heroes who spend almost as much time exploring their relationships (good and bad) with each other as they do fighting super-villains. The ads for the series billed it as "The 'Melrose Place' of comic books," and that comparison is not far from the mark. The well-intentioned, but slightly unsavory team leader uses his telepathic abilities to manipulate his teammates: in part to keep the team together, in part to keep certain team members from becoming romantically attached to each other.

Many of the storylines involve romantic themes. In one episode, a shapeshifter on the team altered her appearance to that of a female teammate in order to sleep with one of the guys on the team; he is now confused about why the person he thought he slept with now ignores him completely. Two others have discovered that their fire and ice powers can interact in highly erotic ways. Yet another member has shown little romantic interest in anyone else on the team because, as the readers discover, he has a young child somewhere in Italy. Matters proceed from there, in more and more intricate and entangled ways. Though the sexual innuendo can get quite thick at times, the content of the series is never stronger than what one might find on a prime-time television show such as "Dawson's Creek" or "Friends."

The young characters are thrilled with the possibility of becoming revered super-heroes. In turn, they worship established DC heroes such as Superman. They often take time out to discuss the rest of the DC Universe; wondering who the most powerful heroes are, discussing the history of some obscure DC characters, and generally acting the way many real world office pools do about movie stars and current events.

The art in *Young Heroes in Love* is quite different from most of DC's other titles, being most similar to the *Adventures of Batman & Robin* and similar animation-style titles. Thick outlines, few gradations of shading, flat color, and a "cartoony" style all combine with the light-hearted writing style to give this series an upbeat, quirky feel that many readers can't help but enjoy regardless of their general feelings towards super-hero comic books.

#### ADVENTURES OF BATMAN & ROBIN (DC, 1998-)

About six years ago, Warner Brothers (the owners of DC Comics) and writer Paul Dini created a Batman cartoon that featured highly stylized art work that was something of a cross between Art Deco and a coloring book. "The Batman Adventures" quickly became one of the most popular after-school cartoons on TV. Among the many toys, trading cards, and other spin-offs of this show was a comic book version, also called *The Batman Adventures* (1992-1995), telling stories of Batman in a somewhat simplified and hopefully more "child-friendly" manner than the often dismal stories of the "regular" Batman comics. Art on *The Batman Adventures* was originally by the late Mike Parobek and was almost as well known and as talked about as the mainstream DC comics.

Eventually, Robin was added to the animated series and the comic. This second TV series ran for several seasons and was eventually retired, to appear only in reruns. The comic book version of *The Batman and Robin Adventures* was published from 1995 to 1997. The popularity and fan acclaim for the title is still so great that DC will soon be starting a new *Adventures of Batman & Robin* comic book.

Based on this success, Warner recently created a TV series (and comic book spin-off) with a similar art style, featuring Superman. *The Superman Adventures* (1996-) is now almost as popular as *The Adventures of Batman & Robin* and has led to the addition of another new comic book series (though not a TV show—yet) entitled *Adventures in the DC Universe* (1997-). The latter title can feature any of DC's heroes, in "animated" style adventures.

#### LOONEY TUNES (DC/WB, THIRD SERIES, 1994-)

This series features new adventures with the Warner Brothers characters that have been loved by children and adults alike since the 1940s. Bugs Bunny, Daffy

Duck, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd, Yosemite Sam, and the rest of the Looney Tunes have aged well and are just as funny and popular today as they were fifty years ago.

#### ANIMANIACS (DC/WB, 1995-)

"Come join the Warner Brothers, and the Warner sister, Dot..." So begins the introduction to this popular after-school cartoon about Yakko, Wakko, and Dot Warner in short adventures reminiscent of the classic Looney Tunes cartoons with Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. The three hyperactive characters roam the world in search of fun things to do and stuffy people to annoy while they avoid being captured and locked up again in the Warner Brothers Studios water tower. Other shorts from the animated series feature the cranky senior citizen Slappy Squirrel, lab mice-cum-world conquerors Pinky & the Brain, three Italian-American pigeons named the "Goodfethas," and a pair of operatic hippos, among others. Banking on the popularity of the TV program, DC created its *Animaniacs* comic book in a similar format—several short stories per issue featuring some or all of the Animaniacs characters. The comic is a favorite among children and college students alike.

*Pinky and the Brain* (1996-) are so popular that DC gave them their own series. Twice per issue, the two lab mice attempt to conquer the world, usually using devices and schemes that would make Rube Goldberg or Lex Luthor envious. Inevitably, either through Pinky's stupidity or Brain's ego, the plan fails spectacularly, leading to the famous closer couplet: "What do you want to do tomorrow night, Brain?" "The same thing we do every night, Pinky. Try to take over the world!"

#### GROSS POINT (DC, 1997-)

Do you or your children like R.L. Stine's "Goosebumps" books? Have a warm spot in your heart for the Addams Family? Love "The X-Files," but think it's a little intense? Fascinated by bug splats on windshields? Then *Gross Point* is definitely a comic to try. The series is about a fictional town where the mildly horrific is an everyday event, mutants and werewolves are commonplace, and slime can be found anywhere.

Each issue has a new story, featuring a different monster, ghost, weird happening, etc. Recent stories include parodies of Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys exploring the mystery of the lighthouse in the center of

town—there is not a large body of water for miles around—and the tale of “Meat” (a guy that turns into a monster whenever a pretty girl touches him) who tries to make a new life for himself at a new school.

Humor and horror form the foundation of this series, which is just weird and scary enough to attract older children, yet tame enough that parents can rest easy, knowing that—even though they may not understand why anyone would be attracted to such weird stories—the title doesn’t get much scarier or more intense than what one might find in a Scooby-Doo cartoon or the least scary of the Goosebumps novels.

#### **CARTOON NETWORK PRESENTS (DC/CARTOON NETWORK, 1997-)**

This series is an anthology of various cartoon characters that appear regularly on cable’s Cartoon Network, but are not necessarily popular enough (yet) to support a series of their own. Cow and Chicken, Dexter’s Lab, Space Ghost Coast-to-Coast and other similar cartoon series are main staples of this all-ages comic.

#### **THE FLINTSTONES AND THE JETSONS (DC/CARTOON NETWORK, 1997-)**

These popular prime-time cartoons from the 1960s and 1970s are back in all new adventures in this series from the Cartoon Network and DC Comics. Each issue features two stories, one with each family.

#### **SCOOPY-DOO (DC/CARTOON NETWORK, 1997-)**

The Cartoon Network and DC have collaborated to bring the world new stories featuring Fred, Velma, Daphne, Shaggy, and, naturally, Scooby-Doo—the cowardly dog with a penchant for “Scooby-snacks.” Mysteries abound as the gang searches for clues about weird and supernatural happenings that almost always turn out to be criminals in rubber masks whose evil schemes would have succeeded, “if only it weren’t for those kids and their dog!”

#### **TRANSMETROPOLITAN (DC HELIX, 1997-)**

This series, set in a not-too-distant future megalopolis, follows the escapades of Spider Jerusalem, a journalist with a lifestyle, outlook, and writing style somewhat similar to that of the legendary Hunter S. Thompson.

Other important characters include Channon Yarrow, Spider’s assistant and foil; Spider’s semi-sentient makermodule (a device similar to a Star Trek “replicator”), which is a junkie and makes its own drugs; and Cat, a stray two-headed white cat that has adopted Spider and has a hankering for high-quality cigarettes.

Warren Ellis, who has made a name for himself in recent years as a writer of dark, edgy, comics aimed squarely at mature readers, is the force behind *Transmetropolitan*. Many of Spider Jerusalem’s strident, uncompromising opinions appear to mirror Ellis’ own. The generally realistic art is supplied by Darick Robertson. Robertson’s small artistic touches, hidden phrases, and surprise cameos often add as much to an issue as the script itself.

In its own, very blunt “in your face until you choke on the truth” style, *Transmetropolitan* tackles topics such as race riots, religious cult fads, corrupt politicians, and the wasteland of television, often using the futuristic setting to “safely” point fingers at current problems. The comedy is often black, the social commentary is biting, the language is strong, and the situations the main character finds himself in are rarely pleasant. Ellis is a master of invective, and his spicy dialogue is unlike anything else in comics today. Because and/or despite all this, *Transmetropolitan* is regarded by many as one of the better current comics overall, and definitely one of the best nonsuper-hero “soft” science fiction comics currently marketed by a large publisher.

#### **THE DREAMING (DC VERTIGO, 1996-)**

In 1989, a new comic arrived on the scene and took comics readership by storm. Written by Neil Gaiman, the seventy-five-issue run of *The Sandman* is generally rated as one of the best in the history of comics, and certainly the best in the cross-genre of fantasy-horror. When it was announced that series would be coming to a close, demand for more Sandman tales was great enough that DC arranged for a spin-off entitled *The Dreaming*, a series of shorter tales by various writers and artists.

All of the tales deal somehow with the Dreaming, the place where all dreamers go when they sleep and all dreams are experienced, and/or the characters who make their home in the Dreaming. Whereas *The Sandman* generally focused on Morpheus, the lord of the dream world, and his siblings (called the Endless), *The Dreaming* generally tells tales one to four issues long which focus on some of the other characters, places and concepts orig-

inally introduced in *The Sandman*. Morpheus himself and the rest of the Endless typically do not appear in person at all. All of the stories are fantastic horror (or horrific fantasy, if you will), are generally moody, with no punches pulled if it furthers the story. Violence and gore are relatively commonplace, and some nudity and some strong language are not uncommon. As the cover states, this is a title “For mature readers.” Mature readers who like the fantastic, some horror, and strong storytelling will probably find something to like in many of the stories told in this series.

#### SANDMAN MYSTERY THEATER (DC VERTIGO, 1993-)

The year is 1939. The place is New York City. The protagonist is a costumed detective of the paranormal named Wesley Dodds—except when he is on the job, in which case he is known as the Sandman. (No relation to the now-ended Vertigo series *The Sandman*, by Neil Gaiman.) Armed with his wits, his scientific knowledge, and his sleeping-gas guns, he tackles cases from relatively mundane schemes of organized crime, to various strange happenings that may or may not be due to ghostly hauntings or demonic possessions.

The Sandman character made his first appearance in a promotional comic for the New York World’s Fair in 1939, after which he became a major hero in the DC lineup throughout the 1940s. In the era immediately preceding costume-clad super-heroes, the original Sandman wore a suit, cloak, and snap-brim hat, coupled with a gas mask to hide his identity and protect him from his sleep gas. By 1942, the Sandman’s uniform changed to yellow tights and purple cape and cowl, bringing him more in line with his super-powered brethren.<sup>13</sup>

*Sandman Mystery Theater* was created by writer Matt Wagner and artist Guy Davis with the intent of recapturing the feel of 1930s pulp fiction, but with a modern edge. With this goal in mind, they returned the character to his original hat-and-cloak clad persona. The series remains firmly set in pre-War New York City, with stories playing against a backdrop of current events, such as the New York World’s Fair and the Nazi invasion of Poland. Occasional stories also reintroduce other Golden Age heroes, such as the Hourman and Blackhawk.

The historical detail in this series is enough by itself to hold some readers, but the writers also provide ample detail of characterization for Wesley Dodds, his friends, and enemies. Dodds is generally a gentle, stu-

dious and reclusive man—quite the opposite of Bruce Wayne, industrialist and philanthropist, or Clark Kent, reporter. Dian Belmont, the love of his life, is also an important part of this series; the romance between the two is explored in much more depth than the typical comic book “juvenile crush” romance. Dian is an intelligent, headstrong, independent woman with career goals of her own, and as such she definitely stands out from the crowd in the New York City of the 1930s.

As with the entire Vertigo line, *Sandman Mystery Theater* contains a dark undercurrent of horror, though in this case it could more properly be viewed as detective noir with a touch of the otherworldly. Many stories portray crimes of exceptional brutality, often involving serial killers and sex criminals. *Sandman Mystery Theater* is definitely intended for mature readers.

Co-creator Matt Wagner left the series after several years, to be replaced by Steven Seagle, who also writes Vertigo’s *House of Secrets* and Marvel’s *Uncanny X-Men*. Guy Davis continues as primary artist on the series. His distinctive, moody penciling contributes greatly to the pre-War feel of the series, complete with leading characters whose realistic facial features and body types are far from the chiseled perfection of most comic book creations.

#### ESSENTIAL VERTIGO-SWAMP THING (DC VERTIGO, 1996-)

DC’s Vertigo imprint has been responsible for some of the most critically-acclaimed comics of the past decade. Reader demand for reprints of some of these series—so that newer readers can also experience these tales—has resulted in the decision to reprint the series in single issues as they originally ran. The “Essential Vertigo” titles do just that, except in black & white rather than the original full color. At this time, there are two Essential Vertigo series, both for “mature readers”: *The Sandman* and *Swamp Thing*.

*The Sandman* (1989-1996), written by Neil Gaiman, is a seventy-five-issue examination of Morpheus, the lord of dreams. It begins when he is released from a long imprisonment by a modern sorcerer, then shows him picking up the pieces of his “life” and domain, dealing with the other six members of “the Endless”: Desire, Despair, Destiny, Destruction, Delirium, and Death. In the process, Morpheus generally acts more human than most humans. One of the central themes of the series is change—the reader is shown how the incarnation of something as intangible and ever-chang-

ing as dreams is himself so bound by duty that he is himself unable to change.

The "Swamp Thing" is the story of Alec Holland, a scientist who dies in a swamp, but through the mechanism of his "bio-restorative formula" is reborn as a "plant elemental"—a creature made up entirely of vegetation of various sorts. However, he has retained some of his sense of self and attempts to make something of a life for himself and use his new abilities to protect the ecosphere, as well as fight the attempts of various evil beings to expand their circles of influence to ever-greater segments of the world. The character, created by writer Len Wein and artist Berni Wrightson, first appeared in *House of Secrets* no. 92 (September 1971), which soon spawned a twenty-four-issue *Swamp Thing* series (1972-1976). When Hollywood expressed an interest in a "Swamp Thing" movie, DC launched a second series, entitled *The Saga of the Swamp Thing* (1982-1996). The character achieved new popularity when British writer Alan Moore was asked to reinvent the character beginning with issue no. 20. Moore had established himself in the United Kingdom through his ability to portray superheroes in a complex, believable, adult fashion, and he proceeded to do the same with the Swamp Thing. The series' mature themes soon lost it the Comics Code Authority imprimatur, and *Saga of the Swamp Thing* became the first mainstream "mature audience" comic book.<sup>14</sup> Outstanding art by Steve Bissette, together with Moore's evocative prose, has made their run on this title a modern classic. The *Essential Vertigo* series reprints the Alan Moore stories, beginning with issue 21.

#### PREACHER (DC VERTIGO, 1995-)

In a world quickly going to hell in a hand-basket, God decides to quit—step down, enter the world of men, and leave the running of Heaven to the angels. In this world is Jesse Custer, a Texas preacher who is the mortal "container" for Genesis, the offspring of an angel and a devil. This gives Jesse the power to control anyone who can hear his voice—if he says "Drop dead," people around him have a distressing tendency to up and die. Jesse goes on a hunt for God, in order to confront Him and ask a few pointed questions about why God abdicated his responsibilities. Along the way, Jesse picks up some interesting travel companions, including Tulip, a failed female assassin who is Jesse's lover, and Cassidy, an Irish vampire with a womanizing streak.

However, there are those out there who want Genesis dead, and thus are out to destroy the mortal "container" known as Jesse Custer. The forces of Heaven have

replaced the Angel of Death with a resurrected Western gunman and sent this so-called "Saint of Killers" to destroy Jesse. Another of Jesse's adversaries is Starr, the leader of a group known as the Grail, whose motives and goals are a little less straightforward. These are only two of many deranged, despicable, delusional, or merely misled characters that have crossed Jesse's path since the series began about three years ago.

As one might guess from this description, *Preacher* is not a title for the faint of heart. The writer, Garth Ennis, has a penchant for "mature readers only" stories and is true to form here. Extreme violence, very strong language, some sex, and strongly positive and negative depictions of religion are commonplace in almost every issue of *Preacher*; "disturbing" is the adjective most commonly used by supporters and detractors alike to refer to the series. *Preacher* also features strong characterizations, a solid plot, thought-provoking themes, and some quality art work. Its popularity is such that there have been several associated "special" issues, and almost all of the issues so far have been reprinted in the form of collections—collections which comics stores have sold out several times over.

#### BOOKS OF MAGIC (DC VERTIGO, 1994-)

Tim Hunter is a British lad just reaching puberty. In addition to the normal problems facing anyone of his age, he also discovers that he has the potential to be the most powerful magician in the history of the world. Tim must learn how to use and control his magic and also learn how to use these powers responsibly. Toward this end, he sets out into the world along with his girlfriend Molly. Due to his quest and his very nature, he often interacts with the creatures of Faerie and has also met most of the magicians and mystical beings in the DC "universe," including Death (of the Endless), John Constantine, and Zatanna.

Sandman creator Neil Gaiman originated this series, primarily about growing up and learning responsibility, in a miniseries; John Ney Rieber has written the first four years of the series proper. With his upcoming departure following issue no. 50 may come changes to the series' tenor, though exactly what will change is difficult to know until it happens.

#### HELLBLAZER (DC VERTIGO, 1988-)

Originally due to be titled "Hellraiser" until difficulties with Clive Barker arose due to his novels and movies of

the same name, *Hellblazer* is the story of John Constantine, a man who dabbles in magic and has studied the paranormal. Constantine's true strength is that he is a con man par excellence who is sometimes compared to the trickster Coyote of Native American myths. He is rarely seen without a trench coat, cigarette, and cynical gleam in his eye, and a darkly humorous wisecrack coming from his lips. While he is generally the kind of man mothers warn their daughters about, deep down he has a good heart and usually tries to achieve the right ends, though not always by the nicest means. In addition, it is rarely safe to be a friend or acquaintance of Constantine's—his supporting cast has a distressing habit of dying in very messy ways when supernatural agents or very powerful mortals come looking for him.

This "mature readers" series contains a lot of strong language and violence, but is also one of the longer-running titles in the Vertigo stable. Even though it has had several very different writers and artists over the years, it has always had a generally high level of storytelling; not necessarily as high as a series such as *Sandman*, but still good in its own right. The cynical protagonist also draws in readers who do not always want happy endings but also do not want the constant depression prevalent in some other "horror" series.

#### INVISIBLES (DC VERTIGO, SECOND SERIES, 1997-)

Similar in theme and tone to *The Illuminatus Trilogy*, the underground novels from the late 1960s, this is a series where all the grand, overarching conspiracy theories you have ever heard (and some you have not) are true. The series focuses on one five-man cell of "the Invisibles," an organization that may be out to stop the masterminds behind the conspiracies and may or may not be trying to organize some conspiracies of its own. The cell is made up of Ragged Robin, a cybernetically-enhanced witch from the future; Lord Fanny, a transvestite shaman; Jack Frost, an English magician and avowed anarchist, who may be the current incarnation of Buddha and may be the most powerful magician in the world; King Mob, an assassin; and Boy, a black, cross-dressing female martial artist who also seems to be a quadruple (and counting) agent, working for everyone against everyone else.

Grant Morrison, also the current writer of DC's *JLA*, is the author of this trip into the inner world of conspiracies and the "invisible" people who create and thwart them. Time travel, prophecies, confusion interspersed with revelations that undo certain past revelations and

bolster others, and a plot that often resembles a tangled skein of yarn, are all hallmarks of this series.

#### NOTES

1. For background on DC's role in the revival of the superhero comic, see Les Daniels, *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World's Favorite Comic Book Heroes* (Boston: Bullfinch Press, 1995), pp. 124-131. A more behind-the-scenes view can be found in *The Comic Book Heroes*, by Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs, rev. ed. (Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing 1995), pp. 8-12, 33-39.
2. Adams' breathtaking art made him the industry's first superstar artist. Many writers have chronicled Adams' contributions. One of the best is a brief essay by comic book editor and historian Peter Sanderson, whose "Neal Adams" profile appears as an afterword to issue no. 7 of Acclaim Comics' *Doctor Tomorrow* limited series (March 1998). A comprehensive bibliography of Adams' comic book work can be found in Alex G. Malloy's *Comic Book Artists* (Radnor, PA: Attic Books, 1993), pp. 32-37.
3. The story of DC's transition from campy to "realistic" super-hero stories is well told in Jones and Jacobs, pp. 120-129.
4. Robert C. Harvey, *The Art of the Comic Book: An Aesthetic History* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1996), pp. 220-223. Another account of the relevancy experiment can be found in Daniels, pp. 154-155.
5. Jones & Jacobs, p. 350.
6. Note that this is not always the case. The series has in the past featured topics such as spousal abuse and the murder of a child, and the writers did not pull a punch if it meant ruining the story. That said, they also did not crank up the emotional intensity nor display a lot of carnage in the manner that some other series have done when covering similar topics.
7. For an outstanding overview of Batman's long, complicated career, see Mark Cotta Vaz, *Tales of the Dark Knight: Batman's First Fifty Years, 1939-1989* (New York: Ballantine, 1989).
8. Jones & Jacobs, p. 14.
9. Benton, Mike. *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age* (Dallas: Taylor Publishing, 1992), pp. 86-90.
10. Daniels, pp. 46-47, 168-169.
11. Jones & Jacobs, pp. 10-11.
12. Jones & Jacobs, p. 55.
13. Benton, pp. 122-124.
14. Daniels, pp. 160-161.